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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses three questions related to cultural geography--(1) do cultural geographers have a serious interest in culture theory? (2) is there some indication in the ways in which cultural geographers have traditionally approached their subject which has given rise to an apparent lack of concern with the implications of culture theory? and (3) are there approaches to traditional geographic concerns which involve the discussion of culture theory as a central issue? Regarding the first question, a review of literature indicated that fewer than a half dozen cultural geography books and articles deal with cultural theory. Further, the impression gained from a review of more general literature on cultural geography is that geographers entering into discussions of culture theory feel that they are entering uncertain territory. The second question is answered by noting the increased emphasis on empirical geographic methodology rather than theoretical concerns and by reviewing traditional approaches used by cultural geographers. Traditional approaches have been based on five themes--culture, culture area, cultural landscape, cultural history, and cultural ecology. These approaches have been broadened somewhat in recent years to include personal preferences and orientations of cultural geographers, but most geographers still maintain that culture (as opposed to the expression of culture) is not of direct interest to the geographer. With regard to the third question (i.e., whether culture theory can play a more central role in cultural geography) the author suggests that cultural geographers should concentrate on determining the understandings which culture theory can contribute to an analogous methodology useful to the elucidation of geographic concerns rather than on what culture theory can bring to an intact empirical cultural geography. (DB)

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# CULTURE THEORY AND AMERICAN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

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I would like to address this morning three questions which I do not believe have arisen in the cultural geographic literature. Firstly, can it be said that cultural geographers have had a serious interest in culture theory? That is, have theories of culture been seen as being problematic for cultural geographers in their work? The second question, predicated upon a negative response to the first, is; is there something in the ways in which cultural geographers have traditionally approached their subject which has given rise to an apparent lack of concern with the implications of culture theory? The third question I wish to raise is; are there approaches to traditional geographic concerns which involve the discussion of culture theory as a central, rather than a peripheral or dispensable, issue?

I

In 1978 approximately one-sixth of the membership of the Association of American Geographers, over 1,000 geographers, declared cultural geography as a speciality. The adjective 'cultural' was first used in American geography by C. O. Sauer over fifty years ago, in 1927. It is a curious fact that despite the scale and persistence of the cultural geographic enterprise, there have been few discussion of culture theory and its relation to the discipline. It is safe to say that there are fewer than a half-dozen books and articles in the literature which deal with culture theory (usually discussed as "the" concept of culture) in relationship to geography. There are numerous discussions and reviews of cultural geography but this has not meant that culture theory has been among the topics addressed. Quite to the contrary there seems to have been an avoidance of consideration of culture theory.

The avoidance of explicit treatment of culture theory is one of the most persistent themes in cultural geography. Programatic statements and reviews of the literature have consistently indicated that the treatment of culture theory is not among the tasks of the cultural geographer. For instance, in Sauer's 1931 article describing cultural geography for the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences we find this statement:

> "In the proper sense all geography is physical geography ....., not because of an environmental conditioning of the works of man, but because man, himself not directly the object of geographic investigation, has given physical expression to the area by habitations, workshops, markets, fields lines of communication." (1931:622, emphasis added).

A statement made a few years earlier by Sauer was even more pointed:

> "It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the geographer may begin solely with an interest in a category of observation, normally phenomena of the earth's surface, and that he synthesizes these observations according to geographic methods for geographic ends, which need have nothing to do with social theory." (1927:177).

These early statements by an influential cultural geographer indicate that culture theory is something really extraneous to the interests of geographers. The impression given in the early literature is that to enter into discussions of culture theory is to enter into uncertain if not totally foreign territory -- work in cultural geography can be carried our independently of consideration of culture theory.

Lack of concern with culture theory has not been restricted to the pioneering days of the discipline. In 1962 Wagner and Mikesell in the introductory essay to their reader in cultural geography reiterate the theme.

> "The cultural geographer is not concerned with the inner workings of culture or with describing fully patterns of human behavior, even when they affect the land, but rather with assessing the technical potential of human communities for using and modifying their habitats. In

> order to acheive such an assessment cultural geography studies the distribution in space and time of cultures and elements of culture." (1962:2)

And finally, Mikesell writing in 1977 brings the theme down to the present when he notes:

> "Finally and ironically, although cultural geography, by definition, calls for explicit recognition of the concept of culture, most cultural geographers have adopted a laissez-faire attitude towards the meanings of culture." (1977:460)

James Duncan has recently launched a salvo against a group of the most prominent cultural geographers for their subscription to a superorganic theory of culture. Duncan faults this group for their holism and maintains that one must consider individuals in the development of one's culture theory. Duncan tells us that:

> "Many well-known cultural geographers refer to Kroeber and White for their concept of culture. Since both of these anthropologists were known as the leading exponents of a superorganic theory of culture, one can only assume that the geographers in question subscribe to this theory." (1980:185)

Duncan does not deal with the relationship between culture theory and geography in his article.[1] Geographer's definitions of culture are referred to as evidence that they subscribe to a particular theoretical stance. There is not, however, any clear demonstration of the role of these definitions of culture in the work of the geographers mentioned. One thing that is made clear in Duncan's discussion is that from Sauer through Broek and Webb there has apparently been no advancement in theoretical formulation with reference to culture theory beyond the reiteration of decades old definitions. Could it be that culture theory has not been seen as problematic to cultural geographers in their approach to their work.

II

If we recognize the fact that cultural geographers have not

dealt with culture theory to any great extent in their work, we can next turn to the question as to why this is the case. Is there something about the traditional approaches to the field which has made culture theory appear to be a peripheral issue?

Cultural geography has been described severally as being highly heterogeneous, defiant of easy classification, or practically indefineable. In 1962 Wagner and Mikesell offered their familiar five themes of cultural geography -- "culture, culture area, cultural landscape, culture history and cultural ecology." These themes were seen as constituting the "core of cultural geography." In the mid and late 1970's both Wagner (1975)[2] and Mikesell (1977) confessed that they would greatly modify the themes if they were to rewrite the essay.[2] Mikesell would add to the themes what he refers to as "patterns of personal preference." These personal preferences of cultural geographers include: "an historical orientation, a stress on man's role as an agent of environmental modification, a bias in favor of rural areas, a preoccupation with material culture, a tendency to seek support from anthropology, and a preference for field work . . ." (1974:460). Out of this dizzying array of subject matter and "personal preference" can we find some underlying features of cultural geography which will aid in explaining the apparent lack of concern with culture theory?

Since its inception the literature of cultural geography has been replete with references to the fact that culture is not of direct interest to the geographer. Rather, it is the expression of culture which is the object of interest. By expression is meant the mapable observable elements of landscape which are susceptable to study with empirical geographic methods. As Sauer put it the geographer was to be concerned with the "design of the landscape".

> "The design of the landscape includes 1) the features of the natural area and 2) the forms superimposed on the physical landscape by the activities of man, the cultural landscape." (1927:186)

Culture is relevant only as the agency which produces some observable mapable phenomena -- the preoccupation is with the phenomena.

Early cultural geographers were interested in working out lists of the essential categories of phenomena which were to be of primary interest. These lists usually included subgroupings of the more general "habitation, production, communication" categories and dealt overwhelmingly with material culture in a distributional-regional context. Indeed, culture theory never seems to move beyond a dfinitional role occupying a palce among the introductory remarks in textbooks and monographs. A review of a sample of textbooks in cultural geography would show the lack of integration of introductory definitions of culture and the main body and concerns of the texts. This lack of integration of culture theory can also be seen in comments made by Fred Kniffen.

> "Even in geography's diversification away from simple landscape description an interest in the landscapes material form per se has never been lost. In fact, to those in other disciplines, geography has appeared to be so materialistic and descriptive, so little concerned with cultural values, as rarely to be counted among the behavioral sciences."
>
> "Geography sees its results negatively in alterations of nature and positively in settlements, primary production, transportation networks and similar phenomena. Culture for the geographer is a means to an end, the understanding of landscape . . . " (1974:252-253)

Kniffen's is a relatively recent reiteration of the classical themes of cultural geography. Culture theory's role in geography is obviously an attenuated one. Primary concern in geography is with the depiction of characteristics of the "surface of the earth". The

surface of the earth (in William Kirk's terms, the physical environment) is seen to be susceptable to depiction by empirical methods. A strong empirical orientation forces a gap between culture theory which, except perhaps in Wissler's trait list approach, involves considerations which are not bound necessarily to an objective, empirical datum such as the "surface of the earth".

If we turn for a moment to Sopher's 1973 article discussing the relationship of culture theory to geography we get the sense that there is a gap, in this case a growing gap, between culture theory and geographic methodology. Sopher reviewed the use of the concept of culture in geography as a part of a larger program concerned with describing the role of the idea of culture in the social sciences. He opens his essay by mentioning that his perspective will be that of the, then, "ruling paradigm of geography" -- the locational school. Given this perspective his task is to "consider some ideas about the location and spatial ordering of culture." Among the topics included in this endeavor are: the areal differentiation of culture, spatial interaction and cultural distributions, and landscape as spatial expression of culture. The concern is with the measurement and mapping of cultural phenomena in an attempt to uncover the underlying spatial patterning of culture.

Sopher ends his review on a somewhat quizzical note. He observes that:

> "The concept of culture has never been more elusive in its geographical application than in the world of today. The challenge to cultural geography is to discover whether it can still use the concept of culture..." (1973:117)

David Schneider's reaction to Sopher's essay, which may contain a veiled put down of geographers is instructive, I believe. According to

Schneider:

> "Sopher is not concerned with any precise articulation of the concept of culture for the uses of geography. He presents, to be sure, a convincing case for the view that "cultural" notions in a broad sense have provided geography with important descriptive material and research tasks. But his terminal comments suggest the need for theoretical work on the concept of culture itself. . . . . As becomes a geographer, Sopher gives a down-to-earth sense of cultural realities. It may be that geographers need to move more into the upper air, where some theory or a bit of frankly high-flown speculation about culture may be appropriate."

In at least partial agreement with Schneider we can see that what Sopher outlines is more properly a geography of culture rather than a cultural geography.

It may be helpful to look at the differences between culture theory (which Sopher feels is on the brink of becoming irrelevant to geographers in their work) and empirical geographic methodology as being rooted in essentially different scientific traditions with essentially different notions as to what constitutes structure or pattern. (Cf. von Wright, 1971)

Geographic methodology with its emphasis upon the depiction of the surface of the earth is rooted in a natural science tradition of explanation. Structure or pattern here is conceived of in mathematical or geometric terms. The underlying spatial structure of culture is sought in terms of essential, invariant features independent of the confusing effects of social factors. This approach to the question of pattern has been traditionally expressed in geography in the form of the map.

Culture theory, in particular pattern theories of culture (Cf. Singer, 1968), are best understood as theories which are predicated upon another tradition of scientific explanation. This tradition, for

want of a better term the human science tradition, has interest in qualitative rather than quantitative features in the formulation of explanations. The model of structure is not to be found in pristine mathematical terms, but in human experiential terms of the relationship between actions, purposes and goals in a human world. In light of these differences a cultural geography would emphasize less the objective lineaments of an empirically given surface of the earth and more the value-rich intricacies of worlds of human experience.

III

The geographer's concern with place presents him with a situation where culture theory can validly be considered a central rather than a peripheral or anachronistic issue. It may be that what cultural geographers want from a theory of culture is better looked at not in terms of what culture theory can bring to an intact empirical cultural geography, but rather in terms of what can be learned from an appraisal of culture theory as an analogous methodology useful to the elucidation of geographic concerns. The geographer's concern with place can be seen as offering certain parallels to the anthropologist's concern with culture. How is the geographer to approach questions of the structure of place? Is the approach to be in the abstract value free, essentialist terms of an underlying geometry to human actions? Or, is there merit in an approach which sees place not in concrete terms of the earth's surface, but in terms of human values and experience.

The geographer's dilemma can be seen in the ambivalence with which de Blij approaches this the central question of cultural geography.

> "A culture gives character to an area. In all cultures aesthetics play an important role, and often it is

possible from a single photograph of a village ..... to identify the general part of the world where the photo was taken..... we recognize a certain 'atmosphere' that we associate with a particular culture area of which we have some knowledge.

These are obviously very subjective observations, and they are of little or no use in any scientific investigation." (1974, p. 2)

## NOTES

1. Duncan's contribution would have been more valuable if he had considered the culture theorists he enumerates in terms of their individual contributions. He lumps together the most disparate and antagonistic theorists under the general rubric "transcendental holist". To lump Durkheim, Kroeber, and Malinowski into one essentially homogeneous category is really to do violence to culture theory as it was developed by a series of individual theorists interacting in what was often a combative mode.

2. Wagner goes so far as to "renounce" his previous characterization of cultural geography. Wagner casts culturaly geography's role as the providing of a cultural paliative to the excesses of quantification and in the effecting of a "deepening of our insight into reality,"(1975)

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